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Exhibitions

Making Plans

The 2016 Venice Biennale is a timely investigation into the roles of architecture beyond building, finds Ruth Lang

Venice Architecture Biennale
Until 27 November

There's a question of authenticity at the heart of this year's Venice Biennale, curated by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena and entitled 'Reporting from the Front'. It asks participants to look for signs of hope in areas largely untouched by conventional architectural activity, bringing to light schisms within the profession as to what architecture is, and identifying opportunities for debate which we are only just beginning to confront.

The V&A's 'World of Fragile Parts' explores the use of copies in preserving vulnerable historic sites, thereby raising questions about the role of the copy in architecture, addressing our relationship with craft, ownership, and the status of the original. Among the exhibits is Sam Jacob Studio's CNC-fabricated copy of a Calais Jungle.

Reconstructions are also at the heart of an installation by London-based Forensic Architecture, which shows how CAD systems have been used to uncover the true effects of bombs in Syria and Palestine. It also features the efforts of architectural historian Robert Jan van Pelt to debunk holocaust denial. These highlight the critical role architecture can play in political and legal processes, beyond the job of building.

In counterpoint to the longevity usually associated with architecture, many exhibits are characterised by their ephemerality. Indeed, some are so short-lived that already, they only exist in the memories of visitors to the Biennale's three-day 'vernissage'. Uruguay's national pavilion sent green-cloaked kleptomaniacs scavenging for items from other pavilions which would later be exhibited back home — a sort of reporting from the front in reverse. It closed down after the press view. Among the fringe events, the spectacular Unfolding Pavilion was only in place for the duration of the press view. The 'pavilion' was an Airbnb apartment within Ignazio Gardella's 1950s Casa alle Zattere — rented for less than the cost of mounting a project officially affiliated to the Biennale. The multilayered installation questioned not only the mode and means of curating but also the relationship between digital and analogue experiences of architecture.



Above

Shower curtain by Michael Abrahamson in Daniel Tudor Munteanu and Davide Tommaso's 'Unfolding Pavilion', staged within an Airbnb apartment.

Right

Installation in the Swiss pavilion by Christian Kerez (ph: Francesco Galli).



But without the big shiny buildings shown at previous years' Biennales, what will visitors feed Instagram with? Well, there's a crepuscular light installation, intended to evoke the atmosphere of Jean Nouvel's Louvre museum, under construction in Abu Dhabi. And a stepladder left next to BeL's blue styrofoam model (envisaging the integration of 12 million migrants into a German urban setting) affords a photogenic perspective. This is the architecture of spectacle set at odds with the architecture of interaction, of immediacy versus lasting impression, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in the Austrian pavilion, whose curators chose to use their budget to fund three building projects for refugees in Vienna. The process is documented in newspapers and giant posters distributed from the pavilion, which are unlikely to survive a turn around the Giardini in the rain, let alone the flight home.

The German pavilion also turns the idea of installation on its head, choosing instead to remove 48 tonnes of brick from the building's listed walls to transgress boundaries both figuratively and literally (and by removing the pavilion's signage, subtly questioning the definition of 'Germany'). Displays on the remaining walls address the absorption of migrant populations, acknowledging the urban requirements of a hybrid community, outlining the demands which are made not just on the state but on the architectural profession in such a condition — the accommodation of flexibility of inhabitants, the necessity of providing the best schools, and the integration of transient industry, all looking beyond the matter of mere housing to that of 'home'.

The question of where the architecture lies in such a condition of continual flux is also one addressed by the Spanish contribution, which won the Golden Lion for best pavilion. It documents projects developed in a stalled economy with limited means but in a spirit of optimism, demonstrating how architects can step in when construction stops to create something even more beautiful — if ephemeral — than that originally intended.

More inspiringly, this reactive stance is counterpointed by the Korean pavilion's research-heavy investigations into Floor Area Ratio, identifying where wiggle room for potential in architectural intervention lies between the parameters of regulation, environment and cost. This, perhaps, is the profession's real frontline.

The perspective presented by Aravena's biennale is not, for once, an artificial overview of the profession, but a refreshing consideration of the glue that holds it all together. This year is less about making buildings, more about making plans. **AT**



Above
German pavilion, 'Making Heimat', with new entrances made in the walls (ph: Kirsten Bucher); Korean pavilion

Above right
Alejandro Aravena surveys BeL's blue foam Neubau model in the Arsenale (ph: Jacopo Salvi)

Right
Baltic pavilion, within a 1950s sports hall (ph: David Grandorge).

